

Bully-Free Schools and Restorative Justice: Two Complimentary Approaches to Peer Aggression

Bully-Free Schools (BFS) and Restorative Justice (RJ) are two related approaches to creating safe and supportive schools that are based upon a shared underlying philosophy and complimentary strategies. Each brings its own strengths and contributes a “piece of the puzzle” to effectively address issues related to peer aggression. When implemented together, they are mutually supportive and provide a seamless continuum of services that promotes school safety and respectful relationships.

Shared Goal:

BFS and RJ share a common goal: To provide schools with a respectful process to hold students accountable for acts of peer aggression and to promote social/emotional learning in order to create a safe and supportive school community.

Shared Guiding Principles:

BFS and RJ also share a number of guiding principles, including the following:

1. The **physical/emotional safety** of all parties involved in an intervention is a priority.
2. The **school community** plays an important role in communicating expectations and shaping behavior.
3. The goal of discipline is to **facilitate insight and learning, not punishment**. Punitive consequences have no constructive place in the disciplinary process.
4. Everyone involved and affected by an incident involving aggressive behavior, including students who behaved aggressively, deserve to be treated respectfully during all phases of the intervention process.
5. Acts of aggression are addressed from the perspective of a **violation of relationships versus rules broken**.
6. Transgressions are viewed as “**teachable moments**.”
7. **Taking responsibility** for one’s actions and harm caused is a critical part of social/emotional growth.
8. **Making amends** for one’s mistakes can promote healing for both targets and aggressors.

BFS is a restorative approach to peer aggression that supports and compliments RJ. Following are some ways in which BFS contributes to the effectiveness of RJ circles/mini-circles, and conferences:

1. *BFS impacts the school at a systems level to create a positive shift in the culture that contributes to the effectiveness of RJ strategies.* BFS takes a comprehensive approach that utilizes a variety of strategies in four component areas: 1) Positive School Climate; 2) Clear Limits and Effective Consequences (including an intervention for aggressors); 3) Social/Emotional Learning for Aggressors, Targets, and Bystanders; and 4) Strong Parent and Community Partnerships.
2. *BFS provides a multi-tiered disciplinary system for peer aggression that includes and supports RJ practices.* BFS offers different interventions for different types of peer aggression, based upon potential for harm and repetition. Milder forms of aggression can be addressed in a variety of ways, based upon the discretion of individual school adults—for example: an informal intervention (e.g., warning, admonishment, redirecting, problem-solving, small consequence, BFS “10 Second Intervention”). Circle discussions may also be utilized for low-level situations that involve multiple students. More serious or repeated acts of aggression are addressed through a

formal process: the BFS Individual Intervention Process (IIP). The IIP includes an investigation, a rubric-based consequence, and participation in a facilitated reflection process. The IIP might result in any of the following additional options based upon the outcome: targeted curriculum, mediation, a circle/mini-conference, full conference, a Functional Behavioral Assessment, an Individualized Plan, or a referral to in-school services (e.g., targeted skill-building, counseling), or community-based mental health services.

3. *BFS provides a facilitated reflection process that is designed to teach specific social/emotional skills to aggressors that promote intrinsically motivated behavioral change.* Note the alignment between the questions utilized in BFS and RJ designed to provide insight and social/emotional growth.

BFS IIP Guided Reflection Questions	Restorative Justice Conference Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you do? 2. What was wrong with what you did? (Who did you hurt? How do you know you hurt them?) 3. What problem were you trying to solve or what goal were you trying to achieve? 4. What can you do in the future when you have a similar problem or goal? 5. Is there anything you might want to do to try to make amends? (an optional question if student seems truly remorseful) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What's happened? 2. Who was harmed? How were they harmed? 3. How can the harm be repaired? 4. What can be done to reduce the risk of future harm?

The IIP guided reflection questions are a teaching tool for students who engage in acts of aggression to increase their capacity to do the following:

- *Take responsibility for their actions and the harm they caused--and feel empathy for the target of their aggression,*
- *Develop self-awareness of what motivated their act of aggression (i.e., the underlying problem they were trying to solve or the goal they were trying to achieve).* BFS recognizes that all behavior is purposeful. Our choices are made with the positive intent of meeting an underlying need to solve a particular problem (e.g., dealing with feelings of anger or jealousy) or achieve a goal (e.g., get attention or status, get someone to stop doing something, feel included). The likelihood of students being able to transfer learning from a current situation to the future is for them to be able to identify the problem or goal that motivated their aggressive actions. Then, the next time they encounter a similar problem or goal, they can draw on a new repertoire of non-violent choices to make.
- *Utilize specific, pro-social strategies to meet future needs and goals that are similar.*
- *Make amends for harm caused, but only in cases where they appear to be truly remorseful.* Students can be taught the 4-Part Apology if they indicate they would *like* to apologize. This is an optional step and should not be required. To do so would teach a student to lie. An apology consists of the following steps:
 - i. *Acknowledge:* Fully acknowledge what you did that was hurtful.
 - ii. *Apologize:* Apologize for what you did and the harm you caused (or might have caused).

iii. *Amends*: Ask what you can do to try to make it right.

iv. *Commit*: Make a commitment to not do it again.

- *Develop cause and effect thinking* (i.e., “When I chose this behavior, I chose this consequence).
- *Learn they are still a respected member of the community* and they have a way to redeem themselves by learning from their mistakes—they “have a way back.”

4. *The BFS IIP lays the groundwork for successful RJ full conferences* by facilitating a process designed to help aggressors take responsibility for their actions—a required prerequisite of participation in a formal RJ conference. The preliminary work with aggressors accomplished in an IIP also lays the groundwork for successful mediations and circles/mini-conferences.
4. *BFS class meetings provide a natural format for RJ circles/mini-conferences* where students can work together to solve problems and explore a wide variety of topics and concerns, including bullying and other forms of peer aggression. In addition to circles/mini-conferences, *class meetings also provide an opportunity for social/emotional skill-building, service projects, cooperative learning, and experiential activities designed to promote a sense of community and supportive relationships*. These additional activities help develop trust and respectful relationships that are necessary for effective circles/mini-conferences. Often, BFS class meetings are conducted within the context of a mentoring, homeroom, or advisor-advisee program.
6. *BFS trains school adults how to construct and use growth-mindset precision feedback*—a research-based type of *feedback designed to reinforce positive effort and behavior*. (Growth-mindset precision feedback supports intrinsically motivated behavioral change and contributes to a more positive climate.)
7. *BFS trains school adults in skills and techniques that are compatible with restorative practices*, including respectful role modeling, de-escalation/intervention skills, and facilitation skills.
8. *BFS includes strategies to impact students’ peer norms regarding peer aggression and respectful relationships* through “social norming activities,” student leadership, and personal empowerment. As peer norms shift in a positive direction toward more respectful relationships, students tolerance for and acts of peer aggression decrease as a result their community norm does not support hurtful behavior.
9. *BFS supports targets of aggression* by taking steps to ensure their safety, connecting them to supportive peers and adults, teaching them skills that promote their resiliency (e.g., reframing), and where appropriate, by providing them with the opportunity for restitution from their aggressor.
10. *BFS utilizes numerous strategies designed to support and empower bystanders and to impact peer norms*. Regularly scheduled class meetings provide students with the opportunity to develop more supportive peer relationships, problem solve, develop a sense of community, promote student engagement and leadership, and develop social/emotional skills (e.g., listening, conflict resolution, anger management, strategies to help targets of aggression), and plan service and social-norming projects. The active engagement of students in meaningful activities designed to promote awareness and impact peer norms is encouraged, including students’ use of technology, drama, and the arts.

Recommendations for Integrating BFS and RJ:

1. **Incorporate circles into class meetings** as a means of building community and addressing concerns for behaviors that are not on the discipline rubric.
2. **Create a seamless continuum of interventions that integrate RJ circles/mini-conferences, BFS IIP, and full RJ conferences that can be implemented based upon the circumstances of a situation.** Factors to consider are the seriousness of the offense, extent of impact (i.e., how severely an individual or multiple parties are affected), the period of time the problem behavior persists, and identified needs of individual students and the student body.

For example:

Low-level forms of aggression that are not on the peer aggression rubric could be addressed by school adults using any number of responses that are relatively easy and quick to implement.

- *Mini/snap conferences* could be utilized for behaviors that are not on a school's rubric (i.e., "yellow light behaviors").
- *Circles* require a little more time to conduct; however, they are still a relatively efficient intervention and can be very effective when groups of students are impacted.

More serious forms of aggression that are on the peer aggression rubric could be handled through the Individual Intervention Process (IIP) used in BFS.

Most serious forms of aggression and/or other circumstances that warrant an additional intervention could be handled by a formal conference—as one option, depending upon need. If a student does not respond to the IIP with a positive behavioral change (or if the harm done has had significant impact on an individual target, on multiple students, and/or on the learning environment) then conducting a formal conference could be well worth the time, resources, and effort required to prepare for and conduct it—in which case, the BFS IIP will lay a good foundation in terms of helping prepare the aggressor to take responsibility for their actions and the harm done.

Other options for an additional intervention could include a referral to a targeted skill-building curriculum/program, in-school counseling, a community-based resource (e.g., mental health agency), or a Functional Behavioral Assessment. The needs of the individual student and student body would dictate the appropriate source of additional intervention/support.

3. **Take advantage of the synergistic effect of both BFS and RJ strategies** to promote a more positive school climate, clear limits, consequences designed to teach, social/emotional learning, and the supportive engagement of parents and the community.